

Series: Life Stories
Part X: Why Is There Evil and Suffering?
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Ron Heifetz is a man of many talents – a true modern-day renaissance man. He is a classically trained cellist. He is also a medical doctor who taught psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. But, he is probably best known for his ideas on leadership that he teaches as the Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. His books on leadership are bestsellers. If you have heard of the term “adaptive leadership” then you have probably heard of his work. Adaptive leadership focuses on how to bring about change and transformation.

Heifetz says that one of the roles of a leader is to create a safe space where people can wrestle and discover what changes the groups they are part of need to make. In order for this to happen, Heifetz uses the idea of a pressure cooker to describe this process. As you know, a pressure cooker is a pot with a sealed lid on top that cooks faster because you use not only heat, but pressure. You place it on the top of the stove and turn on the heat. But, Heifetz notes that if you have too little heat, the food does not cook. On the other hand, if you have too much heat, the pressure cooker can explode. So, neither too much heat or too little heat gets the job of cooking done.

Heifetz says that the role of the leader working with a group of people requires the leader to regulate the heat so that the work gets done. Some groups want to “turn down the heat” and avoid the hard work of change. Other times it gets too hot – tempers flare and the group “explodes.” But, the effective leader knows when to turn the heat up and when to turn it down.

As a pastor and as a leader of this church, I feel like one of my tasks is to do this kind of thing. When it comes to preaching, those of us called to preach have to gauge when to “turn up the heat” and when to turn it down. Today’s parable from the Bible “turns up the heat.” It is a difficult story, but I believe it points to what the deeper life is all about.

We have been looking at these parables of Jesus, and the one we are looking at today addresses again something we began looking at a few weeks ago. It is perhaps the most difficult question we ask – why is there evil and suffering? When we looked at this question before, we talked about God’s patience -- which sometimes seems to take a long time. But, we also said that God’s patience has a limit, and eventually God will make things right in the world.

Today’s parable is sometimes called “The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat” – or some translations use the word “tares” instead of weeds:

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads,

then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear. – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, NIV

Matthew begins this thirteenth chapter with another parable we have already looked at – The Parable of the Seed and the Sower. (Matthew 13:1-23) After that Jesus tells this parable about wheat and weeds. He then tells two shorter parables about how God’s kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed that grows to be very large, and how God’s kingdom is like the small amount of yeast needed to leaven a large amount of dough to make bread. (Matthew 13:31-35) As the disciples of Jesus are listening to these stories, Matthew tells us that once they are away from the crowds with Jesus, they ask him about the meaning of the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Maybe they thought the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast were pretty straight forward, but this one about the wheat and the weeds was much more complex and nuanced. However, before we look at how Jesus explains it, let’s look at what is going on here.

In that time, it was not uncommon for weeds to grow among the wheat. And in the early stages of the wheat’s growth, it was very difficult to tell the wheat from the weeds. Someone has actually found pictures of a kind of weed that grows in the region to show how the two are very hard to tell apart early on. In the parable, the man who owns the field has servants who discover the weeds, so they ask the owner if he sowed “good seed.” He tells them he did, but adds that “an enemy” sowed the bad seed of the weeds.

This was actually a practice when someone wanted to get back at another person by mixing in the seeds of weeds in the ground after the wheat had been planted. It was not only annoying – it could devastate the whole crop of wheat for years to come. You could either burn the whole field, or try to pull out the weeds. The most effective way of dealing with the weeds was to wait until the harvest when the seeds of both wheat and weeds matured. The seeds of the weeds had a slate-grey color. All of the seeds were laid out on the threshing floor. It was usually the women who were given the painstaking, but incredibly important task of picking through and separating

the weeds from the wheat. It also had to be done because at least one type of weed that grew in that area called “darnel” was actually slightly poisonous.

The servants who hear about the weeds being planted by an enemy of the owner first suggest that they should go now, when the weeds and wheat are young, and try to pull out the weeds. But, the landowner tells them *not* to do this because it is too hard to tell them apart. In trying to do get rid of the weeds now, some wheat will also be lost – and the owner doesn’t want that. So, he tells them to just wait until the harvest -- when it can be done the right way.

It is in that context that the disciples are asking, “So, what does this parable mean?” Jesus explains that the “good seed” is sown by the “Son of Man” – a term Jesus often used to refer to himself. The good seed represents those who do the work of God’s kingdom. As we have said before, God’s kingdom is whenever and wherever God’s work is done here on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus then says that the bad seed came from God’s “enemy” and that those who don’t do the work of God’s kingdom are like the weeds. Eventually, God will put an end to the evil done in the world – evil which is not the will of God. God’s angels will do this work in the end. But ultimately evil will no longer be allowed to hurt and destroy the good God is doing in this world and in the world to come.

Now my sense is that when we hear all of this, many of us may gravitate toward the idea that this parable is primarily about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. And while I think that may be a secondary result of all of this, I don’t think that is primarily what this parable is all about. And if we focus too much on who is “in” and who is “out” -- we may miss the main point.

Remember the context. All of these parables Jesus tells in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel are about the kingdom of God and how it appears, grows, and works. It is not really about who is “in” and who is “out.” Yes, those things are important, but they are not the focus of these stories. I believe this parable is about something bigger than that. I believe it is about God’s plan for dealing with evil and suffering in the world. This parable is about God’s response to evil in the world -- not just why is there evil, but what is God doing about it, and what should we do about it?

First, there is God’s response. Evil is real – it is not an illusion as some belief systems suggest. Evil is real. But, evil does not come from God. In the story the landowner did not plant the “bad seed” that grew into weeds. That was done by an “enemy.” God does not cause or will evil. That comes from the enemy of God. So, when something evil happens in our world, we need to realize that God responds by saying first of all that evil does not come from God. In fact, *evil is the opposite of the good God wills for our world.*

So then, what *is* God doing about evil? The parable indicates that God is doing something about it. God cares about our world and the problem of evil. God is not passive. The whole story of the Bible beginning with the introduction of sin in the creation story, through the Exodus, the prophets who try to warn others to turn from evil, all the way up to the death of Jesus on a cross – are all part of God’s plan to deal with evil. And finally, on the cross, God deals once and for all

with the problem of evil. The cross is the beginning of God's ultimate answer to evil. Somehow, through the death of Jesus on the cross, God starts the "breaking in" of God's kingdom, which begins to make things right. It is why from the very earliest days of the church, followers of Jesus kept pointing back to the cross as the central event of God's plan. From that point forward God's kingdom has been breaking into our world -- sometimes in obvious ways -- but sometimes in almost hidden, and even subversive ways -- bringing about all that is good. And one day that work will be done. That is what we believe and what we look forward to in hope. That is God's response to evil in this world!

So, if that is God's response, then what is *our* response as followers of Christ? First of all, *we are invited to join in doing the work of God's kingdom here and now*. We are to find tangible ways to love each other, and even ourselves, in the same way that God has loved each one of us.

But, a second way for us to respond is a little more complex, yet I believe it is the key to this parable. Remember that the servants in the parable just wanted to jump in and start trying to rip out the weeds from the wheat -- like a bull in a china shop. But the landowner says "no" -- *not* because it doesn't need to be done -- but because there was a plan to do it *the right way*.

However, the servants had to wait and trust that the owner's plan would work. I believe this parable is about how we should respond *when judgment is not that clear* -- like trying to distinguish between the wheat and weeds. In some cases, we are simply not discerning enough to do the job right. So, we have to leave it up to God.

In our world today, sometimes it seems like the evil is too strong and our response may not make much difference. Recently, I read a story in the newspaper in which Bryony Clarke told about a situation like that:

In the summer of 1944 a delegation of Nazi officials, including Adolf Eichmann, hosted representatives from the International Red Cross at Terezin concentration camp. The visit had been meticulously planned: gardens planted, barracks renovated, streets cleared. Thousands of prisoners were deported eastward to reduce overcrowding. The elaborately staged tour, held on June 23, culminated with a performance by Terezin's inmate choir. Conductor Rafael Schächter chose to perform Giuseppe Verdi's "Requiem." "When the music stopped, the Nazis sat there in silence," recalls Zdenka Fantlova, 96, a survivor of Terezin. "Then Eichmann murmured, 'Interesting, very interesting.'" Following his cue, nervous applause trickled through the hall. Ms. Fantlova adds, "The Nazis thought, why would Jews perform a Christian prayer for the dead? But Schächter had his reasons." Verdi's nearly 90-minute masterpiece features a fearsome evocation of fire and fury, promises of posthumous punishment, and dire warnings of God's wrath. While other settings of the Latin text omit the unsettling sequences and emphasize only eternal rest and serenity, Verdi accentuates the themes of judgment, justice and vengeance. . . . "Therefore when the Judge takes his seat, whatever is hidden will be revealed: Nothing shall remain unavenged." "Rafael said we would sing to the Nazis what we couldn't say to them," says Marianka May, 95, a Terezin survivor who sang in Schächter's choir. "The Latin words remind them that there is a judge, and one day they will answer to that judge."

Terezin was a ghetto and transit camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. It usually housed around 60,000 inmates, most of whom would in time be deported to extermination camps such as Treblinka and Auschwitz. Terezin became a hub for the Jewish intellectual elite—titans in politics, music and academia. A vibrant cultural scene flourished amid the desperation, with lectures, concerts and plays performed within the barracks. In the spring of 1943, Schächter, a Czech conductor who led the camp's choir, decided to teach his singers Verdi's "Requiem." Ms. May says, "At one rehearsal, Schächter made an announcement. He said, 'I have a dream to put on some very special music by Verdi, that has never been sung in such a place as this before.'" It was no easy task, and the choir faced many challenges. A transport to Auschwitz in September 1943 wiped out nearly all 150 members. Schächter had to start from scratch with new singers. Music was learned by rote from a single score sheet, smuggled in by Schächter. They had only a piano for accompaniment. After long days of hard labor, beset with exhaustion and malnutrition, singers had to grapple with one of Verdi's most demanding compositions. . . . Ms. May's answer: "Being in the choir gave us the wonderful ability to think about the next rehearsal, the next performance—it reminded us we come from a normal world. It was soul-saving. I survived the war and I still have a soul."

They gave 16 performances between September 1943 and June 1944. On Oct. 17, 1944, a transport took almost the entire choir, and its conductor, to Auschwitz. Ms. Fantlova sat opposite Schächter on the way to the camp. "There were about 130 of us locked in the same truck," she says. "The doors were bolted, there was no air. The journey took three days, and no one knew where we were going." She recalls Schächter pulling a tin of sardines from his sock and asking her to mix it up. "This will be my last supper," he told her. "I thought he was being a bit of a pessimist," says Ms. Fantlova. "After all, we didn't know what was going to happen—it might not be so bad." Schächter perished on a death march in the spring of 1945—only one month before the liberation of Czechoslovakia. Of the more than 150,000 Jews sent to Terezin, only about 17,000 survived the war.

For the choir of Terezin, singing the "Requiem" was an act of moral resistance. The condemned sang in defiance of their captors and the fate that awaited them. "We rehearsed without sufficient food, clothing or sleep," says Ms. May. "But those in the choir had a reason to stay alive." ("The Concentration Camp Choir" – *The Wall Street Journal*, Bryony Clarke, August 2, 2018)

"For the choir of Terezin, singing the "Requiem" was an act of moral resistance." *An act of moral resistance* – what great words! Sometimes sin, brokenness, and evil in the world seem like it is all too much. But, in defiance *we* can choose "acts of moral resistance."

For, example I think we do that every time we come to *worship*. Maybe we just thought we were coming to hear something helpful and practical that makes us feel happy about life. That may happen, but like those who sang in that concentration camp choir, we come here first of all to worship God, and to proclaim that good news that God is at work in our world, bringing an end to the evil and suffering we see. It may take a long time for God's plans to work out, but in the

end our hope is grounded in God's promise that one day, God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

We also practice "acts of moral resistance" *when we do the work of God's kingdom here and now*. We do this in part by *standing up to overt evil*. Notice the parable did *not* say that we don't really have to do anything in the face of evil because God will take care of it all in the end. For example, if there is a "field of weeds" then it needs to be cleared! Likewise, when we see overt evil in something like the Holocaust or Nazism, we need to stand against it and do our best to resist it in whatever way we can. Sometimes that may be direct, but sometimes our methods may be subversive – like the choir singing to the Nazis in Latin the message they could never say to their faces. But, still they sang it!

The final "act of moral resistance" that I think is at the heart of this parable is to *resist judgment when things are unclear or we are unsure*. Now, I do *not* mean closing our eyes to the overt evil. Nor does it mean avoiding the hard work of discerning what is right and wrong by trying to "turn down the heat." However, there are times when we may *think* we know what is right, but the situation is complex, nuanced, or not completely clear – like sorting out the wheat from the weeds when they are young. Our tendency may be just to barge in there and start ripping out what we think are the weeds. But, I believe this parable says that *when it is unclear or we are unsure, we need to wait and let God do the judging*. We can do this because we are trusting God to make the right judgment. We *may* be right, but we may *not* be. So, there are times when we need to *wait* and let God make the final judgement – simply because we do not know all of the facts, or we are not discerning enough to decide – but, God is.

And one day, because of the work God began through Jesus giving his life on the cross, one day this will all be sorted out. Jesus says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Matthew 13:43a, NIV) Friends, that is the good news of how God responds to the evil in our world! In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.